DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 651 CE 043 026

AUTHOR Keller, M. Jean; Mills, Helen H.
TITLE How Do You Feel after a Program Failure? TECHNIQUES.
PUB DATE Nov 83
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Lifelong Learning; v7 n3 p29-30 Nov 1983

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; *Adult Educators; *Adult Programs; Continuing Education; *Failure; *Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Program failure has been demonstrated to have both detrimental and enhancing effects upon individuals. Two detrimental reactions to program failures are those of self-doubt and embarrassment. The focus of adult and continuing educators should not be on condemning each other for failure, but on exploring program failure, how it personally affects one, and how one can learn from it. Adult educators must process and discuss their true feelings about program failure. Self-awareness appears to be essential in coping with unsuccessful program endeavors. To turn a failure into a success, educators must seek individuals who are able and willing to help them process feelings about failure. Educators need to evaluate periodically their practice of adult education principles and examine goals. A failure can lead them to professional literature for an update and examination of themselves in relationship to their goals. Being nice to oneself after a failure, an increase in self-reward, can enhance and speed recovery from program failures. (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED272651

TECHNíQUES

M. Jean Keller,
Helen H. Mills
University of Georgia

November 1983

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
American Assn for Adult & Continuing Education
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

How Do You Feel After a Program Failure?

If you have been in adult and continuing education for any time you have had this experience: you originated a program idea, put it on paper, and discussed it with colleagues. The idea appeared to have potential so you asked some key people to become involved and to begin the planning. Instructors were selected, speakers were committed, brochures were developed and mailed; instructional materials and facilities were secured, and then came the waiting. Oh, the dreaded moment. It seemed that cancellation was near for lack of participants. How were you feeling?

Here is another familiar scenario: the planning was done, participants were registered and everything seemed to be coordinated well. But something was not quite right. The instructor was missing the mark and not addressing what had been intended. It became apparent that the participants were disappointed in the content of the program. A sense of disgruntlement permeated the adult education experience. How were you feeling?

We have experienced these types of program failures; however, little is known about others' experiences and how adult and continuing educators personally respond to program failures. The literature and research in adult education is rich in describing successful programs but, as Sork (1981) discovered, reports of programming failures are rather scarce. Even after writers such as Smith (1974, 1975), Lacy and Smith (1976), and Sork (1981) shared program failures and discussed the potential of improving programs by examining failures, few individuals were willing to explore the phenomenon of program failures.

The purpose of this Techniques is to inquire into program failures; to explore how failures may affect the feelings of adult educators; and to seek creative means of responding to the emotional impact of failures. Adult and continuing education practitioners and administrators have investigated the effects of success and failure on their program participants, and many authorities (Knowles, 1970; Houle, 1972; Smith, Aker, & Kidd, 1970) have advocated creating environments where participants can succeed. Yet, what about the effects of success and failure on those planning and facilitating adult and continuing education experiences? What happens to those involved when programs fail?

Living With A Failure

Failure has been demonstrated to have both detrimental and enhancing effects upon individuals (Clifford, 1979). Two detrimental reactions to program failures are those of self-doubt and embarrassment. You may wonder if you are capable of planning and conducting adult education programs. You may feel the disappointment of planning committee members and potential program participants. You might even feel some questioning or disappointment from your peers or supervisor, either verbal or nonverbal, concerning your abilities.

The idea of feeling others' questioning and disappointment often serves only to reinforce our present sense of failure. Mischel, Ebbesen, and Zeiss (1973) concluded that the way we presently see ourselves is significantly influenced by prior success-failure experiences. Fry (1976) found that subjects who experienced failures made significantly greater gains in negative self-assessments. As adult and continuing educators, we need to be conscious of these influences of success and failure as we begin to talk to each other concerning program failures. Our focus should not be on condemning each other for failure; but on exploring program failure, how it personally affects us, and how we can learn from it.

Those who fail a set of tasks often feel depressed, a loss of self-esteem, isolated, and even withdrawn socially (Isen, 1970). Some adult educators may become disorganized, unenthusiastic, irritable, inefficient and unproductive after programs fail. Others have expressed that after a major or several program failures life seemed stale and meaningless. It is very easy to avoid processing and discussing true feelings about program failures, yet, until we do, it is very difficult to begin again. Self-awareness appears to be essential in coping with unsuccessful program endeavors.

At times, it may be difficult to discuss our program failures with colleagues, especially with those who do not want to share their feelings about failure or who lack good listening and helping skills. At other times, our feelings about failure may not be clear enough to express. Even though it may be difficult, adult educators must begin to discern their feelings about failure and share those feelings.

The word failure is negative; just the idea of it can bring unpleasant thoughts to mind. Usually, when failure is mentioned notions such as placing blame for the failure are considered, which too often has negative consequences. It is easy to say, "Well, if they had done their part," or "Everything just went wrong." These excuses are one way to put distance between ourselves and unpleasant program failures. However, failure is a part of reality that most people incur, particularly those programming adult education experiences. Yet, many adult and continuing educators view failure in the way they view dust. It is everywhere, you do what you can to get rid of it, but it keeps coming back; so you may either think about it as little as possible, or you can begin to accept it.

Turning A Failure Into A Success

Interestingly, Clifford (1979) after an extensive literature review on success and failure raised the question, "Is failure as devastating as popular opinion and humanist psychologists imply?" (p. 44). Maybe not, if we can learn from our failures. There is no need to dwell on your disappointmentment alone, share it with others. *Seek individuals who are able and willing to help you process your feelings about failure.* Discuss the successful parts of the program or the program development process. In nearly every experience, something is accomplished, no matter how small. By exploring why failures occurred you can begin developing a repertoire of ways to improve your program development processes. Rather than simply saying, "I failed," ask, "How can I improve?"

A program failure can help us to reexmine our adherence to sound basic programming steps. *Periodically we need to evaluate our efforts and practices of adult education principles.* A program failure can lead us to professional literature for an update in a particular programming area or in the processes of adult and continuing education.

An excellent time to examine yourself in relationship to the goals for which you are working is after an unsuccessful programming experience. Are your goals realistic? When designing educational opportunities for adults remember programs will fail (Smith, 1974). Many adult education experiences attempt to change people's attitudes, habits, lifestyles, and competencies — changes over which you ultimately have little control. When program goals are designed this way, failure may be inevitable. Professional and personal goals must be clear, so that you are able to see progress and success.

Isen (1970) discovered, that for some individuals, failure was associated with an increase in self-reward. *That is, when individuals experienced failure, they did something special for themselves.* This can enhance and speed recovery from program failures. Being nice to yourself can include a range of activities: call a colleague just to brainstorm; read and discover what is current in your area; or sit in on faculty forums. In other words, by stimulating your mind you are better able to see program failure in its proper perspective. Other ways to be nice to yourself could include such things as treating yourself to a special meal or taking a picnic to the park and enjoying your surroundings. Its easy to be lethargic as a result of a program failure. Get your body working and your mind will soon follow. Search for activities, outside of work, that stimulate you socially, emotionally, and mentally.

Conclusion

After you have examined and discussed your feelings about program failures, reevaluate your strengths and weaknesses with the idea that weaknesses can be worked on and that strengths can be the foundation for continued program successes. Exploring ourselves is critical; yet, we must act to overcome program failures. Engaging in a new program venture may be just the action needed to assist you in taking the risk of trying again. Involving yourself in another activity not only consumes time but calls upon creative energies. Your skills and talents are put back to work rather than being passed over in favor of self-pity or recrimination. It is important to remember that program failures do not necessarily translate into your being a failure.

REFERENCES

Clifford, M.M. (1979). Effects of failure: Alternative explanations and possible implications. *Educational Psychologists, 14*, 44-52.

Fry, P.S. (1976). Success, failure, and self-assessment ratings. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 44*(3), 413-419.

Houle, C.O. (1972). *The design of education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers.

Isen, A.M. (1970). Success, failure, attention, and recreation to others: The warm glow of success. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 15*(4), 294-301.

Knowles, M.S. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy versus pedagogy*. New York: Association Press.

Lacy, C.L., & Smith, R.M. (1976). Case study of a programming success based on a failure. *Adult Leadership, 25*(4), 113-115.

Lakein, A. (1973). *How To Get Control of Your Time and Your Life*. New York: P.H. Wyden.

Mischel, W., Ebbesen, E.G., & Zeiss, A.R. (1973). Selective attention to the self: Situational and dispositional determinants. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 27*(1), 129-142.

Smith, R.M. (1974). A case study of a programming failure. *Adult Leadership, 22*(8), 266;284.

Smith, R.M. (1975). A case study: No one for Puerto Rico. *Adult Leadership, 23*(11), 322;330.

Smith, R.M., Aker, G.F., & Kidd, J.R. (1970). *Handbook of adult education*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

Sork, T.J. (1981). The postmortem audit: Improving programs by examining "failures." *Lifelong Learning: The Adult Years, 4*(3), 6-7;31.